

Scroll, Skim, Stare | The White Review

1.

THIS IS AN ESSAY ABOUT CONTEMPORARY ART THAT INCLUDES NO EXAMPLES. It includes no examples because its subject – artists’ websites, their form and function, and the possibilities they hold – is prone to constant change. This text is an attempt to document a thing always fleeting – the aesthetics of the web – without fixing it, since it begins with a concern about growing uniformity and ends with a call for change.

The web has redefined research in the visual arts: sifting through images online. The proliferation of images on the internet has changed the way we look at art because we are exposed to an unprecedented deluge of images online. The visual literacy developed as a result informs both the making and viewing of art, but it has not chipped away at the primacy of the gallery or museum as the site for encountering it. The physical experience of viewing art is, nonetheless, different as a result of the way we use the internet: the body in the gallery space engages with the work by way of selfies, by way of directing a camera. The result, however, is the further addition of images to an internet already full to the brim.

To paraphrase Croatian artist Mladen Stilinović’s 1994 banner embroidered with the claim that ‘an artist who cannot speak English is no artist’, today one could say that a young artist who doesn’t have a website is no artist. Stilinović comes to mind because his maxim is a statement about access and the prerequisites for participation in the art industry. English still dominates, but today there’s also the stipulation to participate in the image culture online. For an artist to have a website is almost a generational marker: many artists who came to prominence in the 1980s and 1990s settle for a Wikipedia entry or a page on their gallery’s website. It’s not that they have no stake in how their work is presented online, simply that since they rose to prominence before having a website was the norm (not to say requirement), they never caught up. Though the state and place of art on the internet is a matter of concern for all artists, critics, curators, dealers, and viewers, direct engagement via personal websites is at the moment undertaken by younger or emerging artists who are more likely to contribute to – and control – the presentation of their works online. These artists can change the way we look at art online.

Could artists’ websites disrupt or shape the contemporary image economy, the current state of visual culture on the internet which is defined by hypercirculation, over exposure and low attention spans? Right now, the conformity of artists’ websites is surprising considering the variety of artistic approaches, mediums, and styles in contemporary art. This is not reflected in artists’ websites: a small number of platforms such as Indexhibit and Cargo Collective are used by a large majority of artists when building their sites, responding to a checklist of unchanging components (CV, contact information, images). The consequence is that artists’ websites rarely do justice to their work.

This essay is not a call to artists to hire designers who will build them custom-made sites (though that kind of collaboration could be fruitful for both). Instead, it looks at the artist’s website as what it could be: an online exhibition platform. This would provide an alternative to the static presentations of installation shots from conventional galleries that are, unaccountably, the dominant mode of presenting contemporary art on the web. We

are living through the peak moment of social media, and the construction of one's image online is a chewed-up topic, but the artist's website could be different – it could offer a new way of participating in visual culture online, it could delineate a new form. The issue at stake in this essay is not only how artists can show their work, but also how these displays reflect the way we see art today and the current state of visual research.

2.

On 16 September 2014, Sir Tim Berners-Lee – the computer scientist credited with the invention of the World Wide Web at CERN, the European Organisation for Nuclear Research in Geneva, in 1989 – tweeted a link to Internet Live Stats, a live counter created by a group of developers, researchers and analysts who collect and present live data about use of the web. The tweet celebrated a milestone: one billion websites. Internet Live Stats is almost hypnotic: it's a list of categories organised by day or by second. The site counts how many internet users there are (a guesstimate: around the time this text will be printed it will be about 3.5 billion); how many emails were sent on the day you looked at the site; how many Google searches were made; blog posts written; emails sent; tweets published; videos viewed on YouTube and so on. It would be futile to quote any number from the site because, as I write this, I can see numbers changing. But here's one: as of February 2016, 486 Instagram photos are uploaded every second. That's over 40 million images a day. And that's just Instagram, just one source of images uploaded to the internet. Every two minutes, people upload more photographs to the internet than existed in total just 150 years ago (and this information is correct as of 2014). This proliferation has changed the condition of viewing images today in a way as monumental as the advent of photography or the introduction of illustrated newspapers in the mid-nineteenth century.

Contemporary art is all over the internet. It is found on Google Images; it's featured on sites meant to sell work, like the online marketplace Artsy and the online auction house Paddle8; it is disseminated via numerous 'one image a day' sites, curated by artists or viewers; video art is streamed on different platforms, some legal, some not; art is featured on Instagram, Twitter, Facebook; it's in the online newspaper and magazine. In all of these different spaces, the artworks travel accompanied by different levels of context. On social media they are framed by publics, both the people who originally posted them (either in an art space or by reposting an image found elsewhere online) and their followers. In different discursive programmes like online magazines or newspapers' websites they often join reportage. On the marketplace websites they are accompanied by information concerning specific pieces' provenance, sale histories, and price. These artworks are often tagged and categorised by medium, and are rarely unique images, but rather, copies of copies of existing JPEGs whose origins are often hard to pinpoint.

This means that contemporary art is inseparable from the current image economy in a variety of ways, first and foremost the fact that art now circulates as JPEGs – that the media of documentation has become the thing itself. This is perfectly exemplified in one popular website, Contemporary Art Daily. Its white background and unvaryingly sized images have become an accepted way of looking at and circulating art online. At least once a day, the site features a series of installation shots from gallery exhibitions around the world, accompanied by the press release. The selection of shows gravitates towards a certain generation of young galleries in Europe and the United States, and the images conform to a particular aesthetic: art on Contemporary Art Daily is always shown within the same familiar environment, including white walls, cement floors, overhead lights. Its mission statement reads, 'Contemporary Art Group advances important art and improves the public's access to it through curated

programming and the development of archives.’ The organisation is a not-for-profit meant to promote access to and visibility of art, but its straight-up translation of the white cube format into the online presentation of art means the art Contemporary Art Daily promotes adheres to value structures built in brick-and-mortar galleries, and is passed around as such. Rather than images of the work, we get images of the work in a building; rather than an expansion of the ways art circulates online, it is an expansion of the tried-and-tested commercial model.

Art – like all cultural production – has a complicated status online. It becomes ‘content’, that catchall phrase for the stuff that advertising is sold around. And that is also the condition in which art is viewed: as part of a mass. An emblematic example of the accumulation of imagery on the web is 4chan. Started by Christopher Poole in 2003 and still going strong, 4chan is an online community revolving around imageboards, digital spaces where people communicate by sharing images. 4chan’s members are in charge of too many memes that have gone viral for anyone to count, and at some point hacked the *Time* magazine Person of the Year ‘people’s choice’ award, giving it to Poole. There is an internet of jokes, visual cues, repetition, and hyper circulation. The infamy of 4chan is the result of its virality, but also of its pace, which, with dozens of images posted by the minute, is emblematic of the way we think of image economies on the internet.

At the moment, few online outlets challenge this primacy of the image. Quite the opposite: the design of web-based magazines and other sites typically privileges images and video over text. This tendency responds to attention economies online – viewers scroll, skim, allow video autoplay. One of the few origins of the dominance of text in the early internet – search engine optimisation – is losing traction with the development of image-recognition software. The result is an ecology of soundbites, of the quick-to-consume, a publishing environment that seems so inherent to the internet it is rarely challenged.

3.

Indexhibit is a web app content management system (CMS) created by artist Daniel Eatock and graphic designer Jeffery Vaska in 2006, designed to allow artists to set up their own websites. It was free until 2012 and is currently offered at the modest one-time cost of €25 (and €75 for a company). The do-it-yourself ethos of Indexhibit is evident on its homepage, where it reads ‘Created by Daniel Eatock, Jeffery Vaska, and you’. The platform is simple and easy to use, so much so that at some point in the early 2010s it seemed ubiquitous among artists. As a result, artists’ websites came to look the same: a list of links on the left (the typeface is usually blue), which expand on the main area to the right. This structure is what Indexhibit draws its name from: index+exhibit. From its About page: ‘The Indexhibit format has become archetypal for the creative community, combining good functionality and usability for the website maker and visitors.’

Though 10 years old, Indexhibit is still prominent among artists looking to build websites, even as other modules have gained popularity at the expense of the index format. Typical are the grid of thumbnail images (a popular template on another favoured platform, Cargo) and the blogroll – the scroll-down through posts, reversechronology design often built using established publishing platforms like WordPress and Tumblr. This might read like a list of service providers, but it shouldn’t: these are the structures through which contemporary art is viewed today.

The design of an artist’s website contextualises production. Just as the white cube (optional: polished concrete floors, skylights) is a recognisable, sanctioned structure for viewing contemporary art, so the list of links on the left or the grid of thumbnail images have come to define the artist’s website. In both cases, the visitor discerns that this

is a space for contemporary art; in both, the architecture defines the viewing experience. Just as paintings look great against white walls with overhead lights, so a series of thumbnails communicates a certain brand of visual art, which is object-oriented and emphasises cohesion, since viewing the grid of thumbnail images or cropped details delivers consistency of vision.

The index+exhibit format also encourages artists to taxonomise their work by project: since the links on the left stand in for a collection of texts and images that will unfold to the right of the index, it lends itself better to combining series of works or different aspects of a project under one link. The blogroll, often presented in reverse chronological order, encourages an additive presentation reliant on constant updating and thus more dependent on tags to create connections between newer posts and the older ones that may disappear down the site.

These three dominant designs are different approaches to information architecture. None of these are groundbreaking or revolutionary but they define the way viewers experience art. They mirror contemporary production, especially in the case of Indexhibit, which reflects the fact that an increasing number of artists are working on a project-by-project basis, whether because they are working other jobs, or because their work requires travel or expensive materials, or because they rely on residencies to find time to produce.

The above taxonomies were not imposed on art by lazy design, but these formats give them the monotony of grocery lists: CV, contact information, news, images. The sites channel an outmoded form: the portfolio, those black folders compiling prints or works on paper encased in nylon, surrounded by title pages and sometimes a single paragraph explanation of each work. A website enables the creation of portfolios much more attuned to the varied forms and practices of contemporary art, whether embedded video, multiple installation shots for three-dimensional works, audio for sound pieces, download STL files for limitless editions of 3D-printed work, video tours of exhibitions, archival matter, research materials and other process-oriented examples, or simply high-resolution, zoomable details for paintings.

But an artist's website could be more than this, even. Aside from those working directly on digital culture – creating websites, apps, and videos meant to be experienced on a computer or mobile device – few artists today think about their websites as exhibition platforms, when in fact an artist's website allows for an inordinate amount of freedom and experimentation to present that work to its best advantage to a wide audience. It is also a rare space in which artists can control the way their work is presented. Unlike the series of thumbnails that is Google Images or a museum or gallery's website, which foreground the way the work looked when it was exhibited in the physical exhibition space, on a personal site any artist can choose to present their work however they choose.

This is a challenge, but an exciting one. A website flattens hierarchies and processes, and makes it hard to communicate different periods in one's work. Do you make the left-hand column chronological? Will 'current' and 'past' communicate the interval between, say, art school work and a first, large public commission? The uniformity of these platforms makes it hard to draw distinctions. As a response to these concerns, a number of artists have sites that feature no images. But art means engaging with images. The visual literacy we learn by looking at contemporary art can be translated to the way we think through images via different media. It can exemplify and help us to recognise that authority is asserted visually. But from that sense of authority we could deduce the power of disengaging. That to opt out of the primacy of the image could also be a point of strength, and enable greater control over the presentation of one's work.

The artist's website is not net art. Nor is it a Tumblr – though many artists use the microblogging platform in lieu of or in addition to their websites, allowing for a different form of engagement with the flow of imagery online that almost negates many of the claims of this essay (except a central one: Tumblr is a uniform platform, except for the 'themes' that allow customisation, not different from Cargo's design templates) since Tumblr has created an architecture of aggregation, organisation and recirculation of images that is coherent and at times exciting. In comparison, Indexhibit, Cargo, and WordPress seem like easy victims. The moving parts of an artist's website as delineated above – CV, contact, images, text – are the information a visitor is looking for. Why chip away at established structures, especially ones developed to relay specific types of knowledge? Why not instead discuss the uniformity of gallery websites or the crimes that are most major art magazines' websites? Wouldn't it be better to dedicate the time to thinking through the presentation of contemporary art in online exhibition spaces?

The answer to all of the above is that while we think we see a lot of art online, we are lost in a sea of images. Though seeing art onscreen has become habitual, there are still very few good online exhibition platforms, and none of them are as well-funded or as sustainable as your regular run-of-the-mill European kunsthalle. The current moment is one of an audience without much to look at. We are miles away from the early 2000s, when museum visitors complained about being shown net art on a desktop in the gallery space since they sit at a computer all day long at work, but yards away from a healthy number of online exhibition spaces. One of the reasons for that is access: to start an online exhibition platform requires programming knowledge. It's a requirement not only in order to build such a platform, but also simply to be able to imagine what is possible when working online. The latter goes for both the artist and the curator working online. Those online exhibition platforms and commissioning organisations that do exist are doing important work in enhancing visitors' understanding of what could be done online, stepping away at great pace from the blogroll of installation shots. But rarely do they facilitate access to the non-tech-savvy, be they artists who may want to work with them or viewers trying to understand the technique.

4.

Indexhibit's homepage shows a list of words slowly emerging on the screen. It's almost impossible to filter the ones which best reflect the ethos of the content management system. A selection will be insufficient:

Alternative Anti-Establishment Archetypal Bohemian Collaborative Committed Conceptual Connected Constant Default Democratic Functional Happy Idiosyncratic Independent Irregular Grassroots Long-Term Maverick Modernist Minimalist Networked Non-Conformist Original Organised Pioneering Punk Pragmatic Progressive Radical Reductive Revolutionary Self-Sufficient Seminal Social Ubiquitous Unapologetic Unorthodox Universal Utilitarian Zen

From 'alternative' to 'utilitarian zen' (hello, new-age neologism!), the artist's website is the patchwork result of many different needs, from a digital business card to an online portfolio and digital archive. But could it be more?

A precursor or role model for a new form and use for the artist's website could be the artist's book. Often printed in small editions, artist-made publications date back to illuminated manuscripts in medieval times, but reached their peak in the twentieth century, parallel to the mass production and availability of books. The artist's book confronted similar temptations to those we now see on the internet: uniformity of design, the notion that the work of art circulates in a much wider network than it would in an exhibition space, and a sense that more could be done within the structures of a known format. An artist's book is not a catalogue. Maybe the artist's website could be the

same: an updating site exhibiting works in a considered manner that responds to the possibilities the web offers. It could be a place to experiment, to try out ideas, and to connect with viewers. Such a website will generate an engagement rare at the moment: visitors might tune in periodically to see what's on view, just as they would step into a familiar gallery.

The lasting form of artists' books will continue to be an example for production related to digital technology, as we are seeing a growing number of artworks that use two hybridised book/digital forms: the e-book and print-on-demand. Both could also step into the void left by portfolios. A catalogue raisonné – an established print product compiling the entirety of an artist's production – for a living artist is infinitely more usable as an updating e-book platform than in print (not to mention many of these books span numerous, massive volumes complete with often poor reproductions), leaving the website to be a living, current space for experimentation with the presentation of work.

To maintain a website is labour, yet another item in the artist's lengthy digital to-do list after other non-artmaking professionalised activities like replying to emails and maintaining a social media presence. Arguably, the personal website is more important than social media platforms (though not, of course, than email, which is the face of work today), since at least its structure – not its distribution – is independent of the platforms of huge corporations like Facebook/Instagram, Tumblr/Yahoo!, or Google. The fact that contemporary artists are spread thin doing work outside their actual practice – and that's without counting the endless applications to residencies, fellowships, awards, and so on that define much of the artist-statement inflected practice that the contemporary art world demands – may be discouraging, but shouldn't deter any artist from thinking through what it means to maintain a website and how, instead of a bland showroom, theirs could be a fresh exhibition space.

There is no way to undo the current proliferation of images. Nor should we want to: the contemporary state of hyper image literacy informs the work of artists, curators and critics just as much as it does the viewing of their work by the public. But maybe we can look to artists to challenge how we look at images – and art – today.

ABOUT THE CONTRIBUTOR

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